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A VIETNAMESE DRIVE ALONG THAI BORDER IS REPORTED BY U.S.

DANGER TO CAMBODIANS CITED

Heavy Fighting by Hanoi's Troops and Pol Pot Forces Is Said to Raise Tension in Camps

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 30 — The State Department said today that heavy fighting was taking place between Vietnamese troops and Cambodian forces opposed to the Vietnamese-backed Phnom Penh regime in an area close to refugee camps straddling the border between Cambodia and Thailand.

Last Saturday, the United States expressed concern that the Vietnamese forces inside Cambodia were preparing to use force to disperse the Cambodian refugees in the camps, estimated at more than half a million, and push them deeper into Thailand. Since such attacks might lead to a crossing of Thailand's border by Vietnamese forces, the United States said it was particularly worried.

Hodding Carter 3d, the State Department spokesman, said there were "significant reports today about military actions on the outskirts of the refugee camps, attacks which have sharply increased tensions in the camps."

Fighting Called Heaviest of Year

Other officials said that the fighting south and north of Poipet, on the border, was the heaviest of this year and involved thousands of Vietnamese troops. About 50,000 Vietnamese are believed to be in that area. But officials said it was too early to say whether a full-scale offensive had begun.

The main fighting was taking place around Phnom Melai, about 12 miles southwest of Poipet, and around Phnom Chat, more than 20 miles to the northeast, State Department officials said.

According to intelligence reports, the intensity of the fighting was heaviest around Phnom Melai. It involves combat between the Vietnamese regulars and forces loyal to Pol Pot, who headed the Cambodian Government before it was overthrown by Vietnamese forces earlier this year and supplanted by the pro-Hanoi Government of President Heng Samrin. One official said that clashes had gone on for four days.

Artillery Fire Near Refugee Camp

But there was more concern here about the clashes near Phnom Chat because artillery fire was encroaching on a refugee camp at Non Samet, and some casualties were reported.

"There is considerable tension in the camps in the area," one State Department official said.

Mr. Carter said: "Our concern about the safety of large concentrations of civilians along the Thai border is deep and longstanding."

He declared that the Vietnamese seemed to want to gain "total control" of the region. "Any grouping is seen by them as a threat to their puppet rule," he said.

On Saturday, State Department officials hastily arranged a briefing to say that they had received reports of a possible Vietnamese military operation against the refugee camps on the Thai-Cambodian border.

One of the sources for the alarm was reportedly a high-level defector from the Heng Samrin Government who said that an attack was planned for the last days of January.

"This engagement is under way," Mr. Carter said today.

In its warning on Saturday, the United States said that "Vietnamese military activity in this area poses a potential threat to the security of Thailand."

"Any expansion would constitute a threat to the peace, security and stability of the entire region," the department said.

Today, Mr. Carter said that the statement had been issued to alert the "international community to the plight of these Khmer and to the threat posed to them by Vietnamese military operations in the area of the encampments."

The problem for American analysts is to separate the Vietnamese effort to crush the pro-Communist Pol Pot forces' resistance from the Vietnamese unhappiness with large groups of Cambodians, housed in camps on the border, who are generally anti-Communist.

At the moment, most of the fighting is directed against the Pol Pot forces. But because they are situated near refugee centers, there is a danger that the Vietnamese might end up attacking the camps, causing havoc among the refugees and increasing the problems for the Thai Government.

The camps are the beneficiaries of rice and other food donated by international groups and some of these relief supplies are making their way into Cambodia, much to the irritation of the Vietnamese and the Heng Samrin Government, which wants to control the flow.